

Counselling Today/Nga Korero Awhina Newsletter

Bullying in the workplace can have dire consequences

Val Leveson talks to Allan Halse, of CultureSafe NZ, an employment consultancy

Are there sectors that are more prone to bullying?

CultureSafe NZ clients who have experienced workplace bullying are predominately employed in Government Departments, Government Agencies and Local Government. This is because there is less likelihood of accountability in these sectors than in private enterprise where profitability is critical to the sustainability of the business.

Government Departments, Government Agencies and Local Government are funded by taxpayers or ratepayers and public servants deem to be paid regardless of productivity.

Incompetent managers are often the workplace bullies as statistics suggest that 70 percent of bullying is vertical top down bullying ie. manager on staff. By contrast, only 5 percent is vertical bottom up bullying ie staff on manager. That is because bullies by nature have to have power over their victims and managers have that power.

Managers who are bullies are more likely to survive as managers and Human Resource (HR) control the bullying complaint process. For that reason CultureSafe NZ believes managers and HR in some organisations deny there is a problem by talking about "personality conflicts" and "performance issues". Victims are often blamed for the problem in much the same way that the victims of sexual violence are.

How would a counsellor tell if a client is genuinely being bullied?

Workplace bullying can easily be determined by referring to Table 1: Bullying behaviours – personal and task related on page 7 of Worksafe NZ's Best Practice Guidelines contained in the "Preventing and responding to workplace bullying" booklet that was published in February, 2014.

This can be found at <http://www.business.govt.nz/worksafe/>

Just go to the search section of the site and write: Preventing and responding to workplace bullying. It is those illegitimate behaviours, the repetition of those behaviours and the detrimental impact on the victim that combine to reach the "workplace bullying" threshold.

Photocopy page 7 and give your client a highlighter and see how many of the behaviours they highlight. Then ask for examples for some of those behaviours they have experienced and whether or not they have evidence or witnesses. The Counsellor will soon know if there has been bullying or not.

What are the emotional effects of workplace bullying?

The victims of workplace bullying are often intelligent, academic with strong work ethic and a history as high performers. They also tend to be very conscientious and loyal. For those reasons, the victims of bullying tend to suffer a lack of self esteem and a lack of confidence and withdraw from the people closest to them because they blame themselves.

I refer to the victims of workplace bullying as being "broken" and more than 50 percent of the cases I have managed in my CultureSafe NZ role have been in that category.

From a New Zealand Herald article of 26 November, 2013

"Dr Jonathan Moy of Careerology (careerology.co.nz) says there are legal definitions of workplace bullying and there is a spectrum of behaviour ranging from mild assertiveness to outright bullying.

"But generally bullying can be differentiated from expectations of a demanding manager/co-worker in that the repeated demands or actions of the manager/co-worker are intended to exert dominance over others with the intention to cause feelings of intimidation and distress. You can gauge this yourself by identifying whether the bully has been repeatedly treating you in a way that you think they are intentionally trying to make you feel scared or belittled."

Moy says that workplace bullying can have severe impacts on an individual's physical and psychological health.

Psychological symptoms from bullying may be subtle early on and include increased worrying and anxiety, hypervigilance or loss of concentration and may lead on to further symptoms like panic attacks and/or low mood. He says that with long-term bullying, there may be worsening self-doubt, loss of self-confidence and depression or even ideas of suicide. "Some severe cases of clinical depression and PTSD can be triggered by workplace bullying. The victim often feels isolated from co-workers and develops conflicted thoughts of not wanting to go to work competing against thoughts that not going to work will just affirm the bully's actions.

"Physical symptoms can be wide-ranging from headaches, low energy or fatigue through to muscular aches or peptic ulcers." 25 percent of CultureSafe NZ's clients have been off work on stress leave, depressed and on medication. Half of this 25 percent have self harmed or considered suicide.

Is there any particular advice that a counsellor should be giving a client if they are in fact being bullied?

There are two different scenarios:

1. In a **high** trust organisation the victim should talk to someone in HR or senior management and seek their support. High trust organisations are likely to have good policies in place to deal appropriately with workplace bullying. They will ensure that confidentiality is maintained and that the victim is protected while the issue is investigated through the prescribed policies and processes.
2. In **low** trust organisations with a bullying culture, CultureSafe NZ's view is that the victim should seek emotional support from family and friends first to ensure that they are kept safe before raising a bullying complaint at work. In a majority of cases (given that statistics show that 70 percent of bullying is carried out by managers) I have dealt with, the victim has been further victimised once they have complained. It's often a long and painful process once the workplace bullying flag has been raised.

The victim should seek professional advice from a union, lawyer or an employment consultancy such as CultureSafe NZ prior to raising the flag so that the bullying complaint process can be better explained and so that the victim has backup.

What should a counsellor be doing if he/she is feeling bullied within an agency?

Consult the Worksafe NZ "Preventing and responding to workplace bullying" booklet that was published in February, 2014 which I believe should be a compulsory resource for Counsellors' operating with employees through EAP and the like. The "best practice" booklet and also the Worksafe NZ website gives good advice on how to manage the situation.

A questionnaire on the Worksafe website <http://www.business.govt.nz/worksafe/tools-resources/bullying-prevention-tools/questionnaire/questionnaire> will confirm whether or not you are being bullied.

What should an agency be doing if it's acknowledged that there is bullying happening in a workplace?

Work with an employment consultancy that truly understands what workplace bullying is and has been a strong advocate on behalf of hundreds of victims of workplace bullying.

Further details can be obtained from the CultureSafe NZ Ltd website <http://culturesafenz.co.nz/>